

AMERICAN SCHOOLS OF ORIENTAL RESEARCH

JERUSALEM AND BAGHDAD

ARCHAEOLOGICAL NEWSLETTER

Confidential

Not for publication

Newsletter #5

1956-57

Baghdad Dec. 7 (#3) 1956

The most significant news is that the Iraq Surface Survey continues to operate in a quite normal fashion. We returned to the city of the Magic Carpet yesterday having completed our fourth round in the field--this time a period of eleven days. Although we lost one afternoon entirely due to blowing sand and were hampered still another day by the same difficulty, we still managed to add 167 red dots to our map indicating that many more tells visited during this fourth period out. Our batting average has improved somewhat over that mentioned in earlier letters for we now have seen 557 mounds in our 38 days actually in the field for a per diem rate of slightly less than 15. We added 6 new Ubaid-Early Dynastic sites to the 19 already discovered making a total of 25 early tells. We worked from bases both in the town guest house in Mahmudiyah and for a third time from a point near Tell Imam Ibrahim. We cleared the region to the NE of Mahmudiyah up to the Jusifiyah Canal and to the SE down to the Sheshebar. At one point we worked within easy seeing distance of the famous arch of Ctesiphon. Since neither of us had actually seen this renowned ruin, we endeavored to approach it from the SW. We succeeded only in reaching the Tigris at a point somewhat S of our intended destination. Everyone whom we asked said, "maku taric ('there is no road!')." Indeed, even though we were quite near Ctesiphon, a police sergeant informed us that access to that place from our present position was only by boat up the Tigris. Since a friend who had recently made the journey from Baghdad itself at 6 P.M. (1) with Iraqi hosts had assured us that it was a trip of only 40 minutes, we gave up the attempt and will try at some later date from here. Even though we saw the Tigris, we still have no connection whatever between the ancient water courses which we have been following and the Dijlah itself. All of our 25 early sites are apparently quite clearly on either a former course of the Euphrates or on canals leading from it. The Tigris connection, therefore, must be sought at another place and at another time.

In the operation of the Survey our greatest difficulty is trying to avoid water filled irrigation canals and the attendant cultivation. This means that we must often drive several miles to find a bridge to cross a canal which is just a little too wide to jump without getting a premature bath--not that this would often hurt us any! Bob suggested that perhaps we should have signed up for the special Physical Ed Course 763, Canal Jumping, before coming out! While this idea is noteworthy, we both agree that a ten foot plank or vaulting pole might be more practical. Wherever fields have been freshly irrigated it is always a few days before even a Jeep will traverse them with assurance and besides who wants to go plowing through a farmer's good wheat or barley. On the other hand, when a field is thoroughly dry, there can hardly be a rougher place to travel than over the various ridges surrounding each small irrigation plot and over the furrows (and I use the word advisedly) made by the wooden plows. One can shake his medicine after taking over such terrain! Only this morning I saw a picture in the Iraq Times of the U.S. Army's new "Flying Platform" each equipped, so the caption said, with three 44 h.p. motors. How we could use a pair of them!

Another problem, as I have already suggested, is blowing sand. When it fills the air, the landmarks upon which we must depend for compass bearings are no longer visible. In such cases, if our map is sufficiently good, we can proceed from site to site via compass. If the maps, however, are of poor quality or if the region is unmapped, we can do nothing but stop working in the field for the day and turn our attention to pottery analysis or to any of the paper work attached to our task. Whenever the wind scuds the sand across the road in the early morning at a level of 6-8 inches off the ground, one may usually be sure that there will be poor visibility by noon, at least, and that it will last until the wind dies or the sun sets. Sometimes the wind blows in three day cycles. Fortunately we have had only one such period this season and even then we managed to work where low visibility did not stop us altogether.

If, and when, the winter rains begin, mud, not sand, will become a factor. All that one can do then is to wait for Shamash to do its drying work.

We learned on this fourth round to examine every palm grove for a tell. The percentage of groves containing mounds was surprisingly high. When asked why this was the case, our good friend, Professor Russel at the Iraq College of Agriculture, suggests that date palms will grow where nothing else will. Perhaps a saline soil is suitable for them. In one instance, at least, we found that a tell had disappeared completely and that others may be expected to go and are going in the same manner. The farmers think that dirt from old mounds is a useful tonic for tired fields. For this reason they haul away by the donkey load to scatter the dirt on areas they intend to cultivate. Professor Russel assures us, however, that there is some method in this madness, because the former garbage heaps and dumps on some of these mounds contain niter. One of his students even asked him to come and test two tells so that farmers in one region would know which of the two would serve them best for this purpose. While there is niter in some of the mounds, Professor Russel is convinced that a relatively low percentage of the dirt thus carried away is of any real benefit.

The chief service rendered by Yasin, our driver-mechanic, is in the latter capacity. During each of our periods in Baghdad, and in between times if necessary, he takes the Jeep or the Jeep Station Wagon to Hillah for repairs. Naturally it is the Jeep which receives most of the attention, because it is the work horse of the expedition's transport. Our demands upon it are heavy and while it performs nobly under Yasin's correcting hand, it does not come through unscathed. Spring leaves are a most common replacement. At the moment it is in Hillah for a new carburetor and a new battery case. A hole in the battery drained the middle cell and the last day out before coming to Baghdad we could start the Jeep only by pushing or by cranking. My lame back tells me that I cranked too little and pushed too much!

This our third visit to the environs of Tell Imam Ibrahim (ancient Kutha) emphasized to us even more clearly than before a fact of which we were already well aware. Although a large site (it is roughly 20 meters high by one kilometer in diameter) such as Kutha may be covered and, indeed, consists in a large part of debris and sherds from the Neo-Babylonian through the Islamic period, patient combing of such a mound will nevertheless produce representative samples of the significant and characteristic sherds from even the earliest periods upon the very surface of the tell itself. In this case the eastern slope yielded all the early potsherds necessary to place it safely within our earliest category, namely, Ubaid sickle fragments, painted Ubaid ware, Protoliterate bevelled rim bowl fragments, late Protoliterate-Early Dynastic I solid footed goblets etc. When we understand it properly, we may even have a decent sample of second millennium sherds as well. So determining the age of a tell from surface finds really works!

The longer we survey the more loose threads we find frazzling from our main string/s of mounds. While it is a great temptation to pursue the threads, we want next to push toward Kish on the one hand and toward Sippar on the other. Day before yesterday we were using the late ziggurat at Kish for compass bearings. In the direction of Sippar we have now established a bridge-head across the Baghdad-Hillah road by fixing the locations of two or three tells just to the W of that highway on the map in order that we may later use them for compass bearings also. From them Tell ed-Deir is plainly visible.

As a note of interest and contrast I might describe two lunches that we had recently. A few days ago E of Mah mudiyyeh we drove into a small village where a sheikh having come from a rather impressive qalat was supervising some wheat winnowing. The time was just a few minutes past 11:00 a.m. The two tells which we wished to see could be reached by foot, so after the customary greetings, Bob headed for one and I for the other. Before parting I said, "Be prepared for lunch when we return." More than an hour later during which time Nagib, our representative, had had a long chat with the sheikh and his retainers, we did come back. The sheikh promptly invited us to lunch. We protested that we had much work and little time. Our host insisted just as emphatically, "We are Arabs. You cannot go without accepting our hospitality. Besides, I have two brothers in the States studying to be engineers." That was the last straw and the end to our protests. We went into a small mud and reed house where rugs and pillows had been placed for our comfort. We removed our muddy boots and sat cross legged like the ten other men who had come while two roasted chickens, fresh khubuz, radishes, onions, chicken broth and lebn were brought. As we ate, we talked. One of the brothers had been in Lincoln, Nebraska for seven years; the other in Chicago for two and a half years. The sheikh's handsome teen-aged son who still has two years of secondary school in Baghdad was present. His father hopes to send him to the U.S. to study agriculture. So it goes in this ancient land with its friendly people.

was

The other lunch/yesterday at the Hotel Sindbad. Ordinarily, when in Baghdad we eat a light breakfast and lunch at the Institut and go out in the evening for our main meal. Yesterday morning, as it happened before we left Kutha, our breakfast consisted of exactly half an apple each. That was all the breakfast food that we had left. So naturally after arriving here, reading our mail, bathing, and mowing a nine days' growth of beard, our thoughts turned to food. "Where will it be today?" asked Bob. "The Sindbad?". "Sounds like a good idea," I replied. So we were off. We ate our way through soup, spaghetti with chopped meat, beef, mashed potatoes, and carrots. At this point the waiter brought dessert--stewed prunes with sauce. Bob who had read the menu more carefully than I asked, still in a hungry tone, "What goes on here? Where is the cold meat and salad course listed on the menu?" "Sorry sir, just a moment!" So it was promptly brought to be followed minutes later by the dessert, fruit and Turkish coffee. It may sound like a lot, but when we are in the field we eat to live; when in Baghdad, for at least one meal a day, we live to eat!

Vaughn E. Crawford
Director